

Review Essay Series

REGIONAL IMAGE AND SENSE OF PLACE IN KANSAS

James R. Shortridge

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

At least since 1541 when Francisco Vázquez de Coronado—so the story goes—executed the guide who led him to this region, image has concerned the inhabitants and potential inhabitants of this place we call Kansas. More recently journalist Thomas Frank revisited the old question *What's the Matter with Kansas?* to comment on conservatism's apparent triumph over "the Heart of America." For a variety of reasons, Kansas—America "double distilled," as historian Carl Becker characterized it nearly one hundred years ago—was the perfect foil. Between Coronado and Frank, numerous journalists, politicians, and other observers of things Kansas have had much to say, but few have systematically examined questions of perception or image and their overall impact on the Sunflower State.

In his engaging contribution to our review essay series, James R. Shortridge, author of *Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture* and other fine regional studies, examines the literature and explores "the importance of place-based symbols and myth" in the development of Kansas. Scholars have long argued that "Such imagery . . . influences outsiders in their decisions where to visit or to establish new businesses. It also affects how local residents perceive them-

"I mage is everything," asserts Andre Agassi in a recent series of camera advertisements. Although geographers and historians would not take the point this far, they do increasingly acknowledge the importance of place-based symbols and myth in the development (or nondevelopment) of particular cities and regions. Such imagery, they argue, influences outsiders in their decisions where to visit or to establish new businesses. It also affects how local residents perceive themselves and their roles within a broader society. Many scholars, including those in this series of review essays, have touched upon Kansas imagery and its meaning, but only a few address the subject directly. Robert Bader has written the only book on the subject, while Paul Stuewe and Thomas Averill have compiled useful collections of articles.¹ Given the lack of secondary material, my review necessarily emphasizes images recorded firsthand by contemporary observers. After brief consideration of the symbolism associated with the 1850s debate over exactly what acreage should bear the name Kansas, I begin with conceptions of the state as a whole and how these change over time. Then, I turn to geographical variations within the state, particularly differences said to exist between eastern and western Kansas and Kansans.

EARLY ASSESSMENTS

When Congress established Kansas Territory in 1854, the region's western border extended to the continental divide in what is now central Colorado. Most Kansans know this fact, but few realize that it was local people themselves—delegates to the Wyandotte Constitutional Convention—who pruned away the

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1. Robert S. Bader, *Hayseeds, Moralizers, and Methodists: The Twentieth-Century Image of Kansas* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988); Paul K. Stuewe, ed., *Kansas Revisited: Historical Images and Perspectives* (Lawrence: Division of Continuing Learning, University of Kansas, 1990); Thomas Fox Averill, ed., *What Kansas Means to Me: Twentieth-Century Writers on the Sunflower State* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991).

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One of the many ever-changing images of Kansas is illustrated in this promotional booklet published in 1907 by the Rock Island railroad.

selves," writes Professor Shortridge. "Many scholars, including those in this series of review essays, have touched upon Kansas imagery and its meaning, but only a few address the subject directly."

Kansans always seem to have been overly concerned about issues of character and image: perhaps because of what happened to Coronado's guide in 1541, or because of the highly visible troubles involving the territory's founding in the 1850s, or because of that most famous "What's the Matter With Kansas?" diatribe against those "clodhoppers" who were giving the state a "hick" image during the 1890s. Even before, and certainly ever since, William Allen White penned that memorable editorial the question has been a vital one. But surprisingly, as Professor Shortridge points out, it has attracted little direct scholarly attention. He focuses, therefore, on "images recorded firsthand by contemporary observers," beginning with Stephen H. Long's 1820 expedition and continuing through the late twentieth-century's "flyover country" characterization—the "modern equivalent" of Long's "Great American Desert" epithet.

All is not necessarily lost for Kansas and Kansans. Professor Shortridge finds positive trends and developments that, while tenuous, may yet have lasting impact statewide as have the rise of strong regional images (both positive and negative) within the state. Shortridge even detects the potential for success in the state's new slogan, "As Big as You Think," if it would happen to actually make Kansans "think" and start interpreting "their state for themselves." Nevertheless, as "Kansans struggle to find their way in this postmodern world, . . . their best motto is still the one from 1861—'Ad Astra per Aspera.' The 'aspera' in the twenty-first century, however, are more attitudinal than environmental."

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mountains and western plains. Fewer still are aware that this reasoning was based almost entirely on image. The convention representatives in 1859, none of whom lived west of Council Grove or Manhattan, clearly feared inclusion of the mountains in a new Kansas. Mountains implied miners, argued William C. McDowell of Leavenworth, "a people not homogeneous, whose wants will be different and very little in common with ours." The delegates deemed the dry plains equally undesirable, although for a different cause. This was "a miserable, uninhabited region," according to Lawrence's Solon O. Thatcher, one that likely would become a burden to the state's taxpayers. His credo, that "a compact territory of good arable land is better than to be extended over a wild region," was accepted by nearly all the assembly. Their debate, therefore, was only over which meridian west from Washington, D. C., best approximated the arable-nonarable line. After considering choices ranging from the 23d (Hill City–Dodge City) to the 26th (New Mexico line), they rather arbitrarily settled on the 25th, a line that remains the boundary today and that therefore has influenced all subsequent imagery.²

The 1859 search for "a natural sandy divide" between miner and farmer epitomizes a general view that the Great Plains was a desert.³ This is part of what most modern scholars have seen as a dichotomous assessment of the region held during the early years of Anglo-American settlement. An overly negative judgment, so the story goes, dominated from the 1820s into the 1860s. It then gave way to an equally exaggerated positive view—the region as a garden—that helped propel waves of settlers into central and western Kansas during the 1870s and 1880s. Such optimism set the stage for disaster in the 1890s when a prolonged drought ended this sequence of mythmaking.

Simple models usually are compelling, and the desert–garden dyad works well at one level of abstraction. Underappreciated research by Martyn Bowden and Walter Kollmorgen has revealed considerable nuance in both concepts, however. Collectively their insights help illuminate the nineteenth-century experience in Kansas. Bowden and his students wondered if the desert idea was accepted equally in all sections of the country after it was first popularized in reports from the 1820 expedition of Major Stephen Long. Their survey found that newspapers in the South and Midwest balanced the negative account with other, more positive assessments. Only in major eastern cities did the desert view hold supreme. The most convincing explanation for this concentration of belief involves the manipulation of geographic image for political gain. Bostonians and New Yorkers feared loss of their political and economic power as the country expanded rapidly westward. Subconsciously, perhaps, they realized that a promulgation of desert imagery might help to slow this undesired process.⁴ Bowden's research makes one rethink the Kansas statements at the Wyandotte Convention. Were the fears

2. Ariel E. Draper, ed., *Proceedings and Debates of the Kansas Constitutional Convention* (Wyandotte, Kans.: S. D. MacDonald, 1859), quotations on 145, 141. These debates are summarized in George W. Martin, "The Boundary Lines of Kansas," *Kansas Historical Collections*, 1909–1910 11 (1910): 53–74.

3. Draper, *Proceedings and Debates*, 139–40.

4. This work is cited and summarized in John L. Allen, "The Garden–Desert Continuum: Competing Views of the Great Plains in the Nineteenth Century," *Great Plains Quarterly* 5 (Fall 1985): 207–20. Martyn Bowden's two major studies are "The Perception of the Western Interior of the United States, 1800–1870: A Problem in Historical Geosophy," *Proceedings of the Association of American Geographers* 1 (1969): 16–21, and "The Great American Desert and the American Frontier, 1800–1882," in *Anonymous Americans: Explorations in Nineteenth-Century Social History*, ed. Tamara K. Hareven (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971), 48–79.

expressed toward mining culture and sandy soil real or only a subterfuge? Is it not likely that McDowell, Thatcher, and their colleagues worried more that an elongated Kansas might imply consideration of Fort Hays and Fort Larned as settings for the new state's capital and university rather than their own home towns in the east?

Kollmorgen focused new attention on the garden concept. He did not challenge the creation and manipulation of this idea by greedy speculators in agricultural land, townsites, and railroads. These people, along with congressional representatives, poor immigrants, and almost everybody else, seemed to have financial interests in Kansas during the late nineteenth century. Rather, his work demonstrates how their collective avarice was supported by a series of environmental perceptions. The most important of these held that rainfall would increase as a result of settlement. Rainmaking logic began with two facts: prairie sod was an insulator that retarded evaporation of soil moisture, and trees naturally transpired thousands of gallons of water daily. Believers then reasoned that a simple plowing of the Kansas grassland and the adding of a few trees should saturate the atmosphere and thereby increase precipitation. That such thinking seemed scientifically logical at the time is suggested by the Timber Culture Act of 1873. This popular federal measure allowed homesteaders to acquire a second 160 acres of free land if they agreed to plant part of it in trees. The impact also can be seen on a modern political map of the state. Trusting that rain would come, settlers in the 1880s platted counties along the Colorado border similar in size to those of eastern Kansas or Illinois. Later, as people expanded individual land holdings there to reflect climatic realities, they left the original political units intact, silent reminders of an earlier expectation.⁵

The stories of desert and garden belong to the plains states as a whole. For Kansas itself, however, their images were superseded during the last half of the nineteenth century by a set of symbols associated with New England settlers. These people had lobbied successfully in the late 1850s for Kansas to enter the

Free Homesteads in the Garden of the World.

SOME GENERAL PRACTICAL INFORMATION

IN REGARD TO THE

“Great State of Kansas.”

The Greatest Fruit, Stock and Grain Country in the World.

Perceptions of Kansas as either a desert or a garden were exaggerated during the mid to late 1800s. The garden concept, as depicted in this 1870 promotional booklet, was commonly utilized to encourage settlement in the Sunflower State.

5. Walter M. Kollmorgen, “The Woodsman’s Assaults on the Domain of the Cattleman,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 59 (June 1969): 215–39. Other environmental ideas said to support the garden concept include an overestimation of potential for irrigation and a belief in dry-farming technology. The classic account of land fraud in the state is Paul W. Gates, *Fifty Million Acres: Conflicts over Kansas Land Policy, 1854–1890* (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1954). On the garden concept, see Henry N. Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950); David M. Emmons, *Garden in the Grasslands: Boomer Literature of the Central Great Plains* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971).

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Union as a free state. Supported by colleagues in the media centers of New York and Boston, they painted their political victory in heroic terms and claimed that it influenced the state's collective temperament in fundamental and enduring ways. People believed them too, Kansans and outsiders alike. In fact, their influence is hard to overstate. To this day one can still find accounts that Kansas was colonized rather than settled and that the state is an outlier of New England morality.

The first fully formed assessments of the Kansas character were written in the late 1880s and early 1890s. Pioneer expansion was nearly complete at this time, and the drought conditions of the 1890s had yet to sap enthusiasm. As a result, writers celebrated progress. The state had climbed rapidly to nearly one and a half million residents, new barns and roads covered the landscape, and manufacturing was on the rise. Most praise, however, went to the people themselves. They were Union veterans, by and large, wrote Governor John A. Martin, "a brave, hardy, and patriotic population, accustomed to the discipline and endurance of army life, and bound together by the strongest ties, those of attachment to a common cause in the past." Kansans also were said to exhibit the best in social ethics. They "are New Englanders or the descendents of New Englanders," claimed J. W. Gleed. Senator John J. Ingalls explained what this heritage implied, saying that the state was a pastoral paradise, a place that "resembles primitive Massachusetts before its middle classes had disappeared and its society become stratified into the superfluously rich and the hopelessly poor."⁶

Ingalls's claim that Kansas was an improved version of the East was repeated by nearly every writer from this period. People praised the state's high percentage of American-born citizens, their honesty, and their youthful energy and optimism. This was, the observers said, an egalitarian place where property values and spending on education were increasing even more rapidly than population. Kansas, they concluded, had become the most American part of America.

THE GOLDEN AGE

Depictions of a glorious Kansas in the 1880s were premature. Eleven years of major drought sandwiched around a national business depression in 1893 stopped such optimism cold. For Stanton County on the state's southwestern frontier, for example, the realities from this period were impossible to spin positively. From a peak population of 2,216 in 1888, numbers there dropped to fewer than 300 by 1897. People literally abandoned their county seat of Johnson City at this time, and settlement remained too small to necessitate local elections until 1923.⁷

When drought and financial panic ended the expansionist economy, Kansans' first reaction was to blame outsiders. Populism was the most obvious expression. By 1897 and 1898, however, some observers had begun to consider the state from a new perspective. The problems of the recent past, these people reasoned, could best be regarded as needed lessons. During the speculative years, wrote Emporia's William Allen White, Kansans "ceased to be business men, and became gamblers, with land as the stakes." Now, "the gambler is gone," and the state much the better for it. Debt remained, of course, but commentators saw good even in this. Ten-

6. John A. Martin, "The Progress of Kansas," *North American Review* 142 (April 1886): 348–55, quotation on 350; J. W. Gleed, "Is New York More Civilized than Kansas?" *Forum* 17 (April 1894): 217–34, quotation on 218; John J. Ingalls, "Kansas: 1541–1891," *Harper's Magazine* 86 (April 1893): 696–713, quotation on 706.

7. *Stanton County, Kansas: 1887–1987* (N.p., 1987), 73–77.

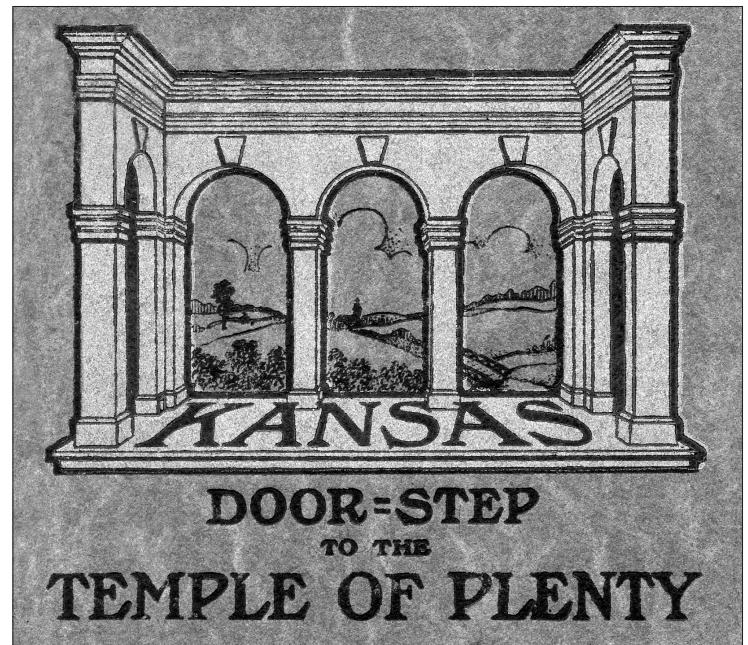
sions between nervous eastern lenders and hard-pressed Kansas borrowers forced plains people to become more independent. Debt payments also were humbling. As Abilene newspaperman Charles Harger wrote, these were important "lessons of saving, of thrift, of endurance."⁸

Time was a final element in the crafting of a new Kansas self-image in the late 1890s. Heretofore the state's leaders had been transplanted easterners who sometimes spoke of going "back home" when their fortunes had been made. White observed in 1897 that this word "home" was now being applied to Kansas for the first time: "The present residents of the State mean to remain."⁹

The arguments of White and Harger resonated immediately and deeply with their contemporaries. A new and admirable society was emerging on the plains, and the reasons for it seemed clear. Industrious, northern settlers obviously were a key ingredient, but not the only one. The 1880s had proved how greed could corrupt even the best immigrant stock. The other component required was the unique environment of the Central Plains. It was fertile and potentially rewarding, but also harsh enough to test people's character. Weak-willed settlers would leave the region. Those who stayed would be chastened and gain a clear-eyed, pragmatic approach to life. Typical of the general commentary were these words of a visiting New York journalist:

It was interesting to watch the effect of this [return to] prosperity upon the farmers. So far as I could observe and learn there was little elation. The carnival at Manhattan was the only case of open rejoicing that I heard in the State of Kansas. The joy that came to the thousands upon thousands of homes . . . is the kind that expresses itself oftenest in tears. With the money that they made last year the farmers purchased the necessities they had gone without, and the luxuries that their wives and daughters craved, and then they went home ready to face the problems of this and the coming years with renewed courage, longing for more years of plenty, but prepared, with their surplus earnings and their experience in economy and improved methods of farming, to meet fearlessly another drought of one or even more years.¹⁰

Once rooted, the conception of Kansas people as an especially hardy breed of yeoman farmers went largely unchallenged throughout the first two decades of the twentieth century. Local residents obviously liked the flattering portrait, and so did other Americans. One measure of the acceptance is how a label for this re-



Depictions of a glorious Kansas in the 1870s and 1880s were premature. But following the drought and depression of the 1890s, state leaders began to rebuild the Kansas image. (Above) A booklet from 1910 touts an improved Kansas on the "threshold of its greatest development."

8. William Allen White, "A Typical Kansas Community," *Atlantic Monthly* 80 (July 1897): 171–77, quotation on 171; Charles M. Harger, "New Era in the Middle West," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 97 (July 1898): 276–82, quotation on 278.

9. White, "A Typical Kansas Community," 171.

10. Franklin Matthews, "Bright Skies in the West," *Harper's Weekly* 42 (January 29, 1898): 113–14; (February 5, 1898): 138–39; (February 12, 1898): 161–63; (February 19, 1898): 186–89; (February 26, 1898): 208–10; (March 5, 1898): 231–32; (March 12, 1898): 256; (March 19, 1898): 278–79; (April 12, 1898): 322–23; quotation on 163.

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gional culture spread to encompass a much larger area. The phrase Middle West referred only to Kansas and Nebraska society in the late 1890s, a way to distinguish life in the Central Plains from that in the more frontierlike Northwest of the Dakotas and the culturally different Southwest of Texas and Indian Territory. By 1920 most people from Ohio to North Dakota had adopted this label and its positive cultural associations for themselves.¹¹

As other states began to co-opt the pastoral ideals of the Central Plains, one might have expected Kansas to lose its distinctiveness. This did not happen, however, because of the special puritan component in local culture. Even though studies by this time had revealed that the actual migration from New England had been small, this did not matter. Kansans had convinced themselves that the heritage was real. They appropriated it as their own. This was the message in article after article, including William Allen White's aptly titled "Kansas: A Puritan Survival" and what has become the classic assessment of the state at this time, Carl Becker's "Kansas."¹²

Becker, a historian who taught at the University of Kansas from 1902 to 1916, argued that frontiers attract idealists, people who dream of a better world and the perfectibility of men. Kansas settlers, he said, took New England society as their point of departure. Emboldened by their success in the establishment of a free-state constitution, they soon enlarged their goals to include prohibition of liquor, political reform, public health education, and more. The results were impressive by 1910. "The belief that Kansas was founded for a cause . . . gives to the temper of the people a certain elevated and martial quality." They possess, he concluded, "the American spirit double distilled," praise as high as anybody could imagine.¹³

BYPASSED AMERICA

Some people might argue that Kansas's reign as the exemplar of the American spirit endured into the early 1950s. Dwight D. Eisenhower justifies this interpretation, they might say, an honest, hard-working man who utilized these stereotypical Kansas traits to become a national icon during World War II and after. There is truth in this view. Careful reading of popular literature about the state suggests a more complex situation, however. These writings imply that the golden years lasted only until 1920 or so. After this came a decade of mixed but increasingly negative assessments before the onsets of the Dust Bowl and then world war directed attention in new directions.

The image of a progressive, idealistic Kansas was built through a series of legislative initiatives that regulated railroads, limited child labor, granted woman

11. James R. Shortridge, *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1989), 13–38.

12. William Allen White, "Kansas: A Puritan Survival," in *These United States: A Symposium*, ed. Ernest Gruening, vol. 1 (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1923), 1–12; Carl L. Becker, "Kansas," in *Essays in American History Dedicated to Frederick Jackson Turner* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1910), 85–111. Other important statements of puritan/yeoman glory in Kansas include William Allen White, "Kansas: Its Present and its Future," *The Forum* 23 (March 1897): 75–83; Edwin Taylor, "In Defence of Kansas," *North American Review* 164 (March 1897): 349–55; Frank W. Blackmar, "Kansas After the Drought," *Review of Reviews* 24 (September 1901): 314–20; Charles M. Harger, "The Kansas of To-Day," *Atlantic Monthly* 90 (September 1902): 361–70; Sarah Comstock, "The Kansas Farmer's Wife," *Collier's* 42 (January 2, 1909): 8–9; Julian Street, "Kansas—Where All Signs Fail," *ibid.* 54 (October 24, 1914): 17, 20, 30–34; Florence F. Kelly, "A Study of Prohibition in Kansas," *Outlook* 111 (November 10, 1915): 626–31; William Allen White, "Kansas: The Glory of the States," *American Magazine* 81 (January 1916): 41, 65.

13. Becker, "Kansas," 99, 110.

suffrage, created sanitation standards for industry, and established an eight-hour work day. Once begun, however, this urge to prescribe societal behavior was hard to stop. The first public statements that the state may have gone too far concern liquor. After praising Kansas reforms in many ways (including the outlawing of the saloon in 1880), journalist Albert Nock wrote ominously in 1916 that the relation between state and citizen had become "that of guardian and ward." What this might mean was soon apparent to other observers. A reporter sent to Emporia by *Collier's* magazine in 1923, for example, was struck by the community's air of solemnness. "Not once did I detect the slightest suggestion of merriment," he wrote, "not a note of gayety." Instead, people seemed to be wearing halos of self-righteousness. They grew more conservative every year and took pride only in that, by prohibiting cigarettes and dancing, their morality now surpassed that of Ohio or Indiana and was "incomparably superior to New York or San Francisco."¹⁴

Perhaps the most balanced statement about Kansas culture in the 1920s came from journalist W. G. Clugston, a Kentucky native who worked for newspapers in Kansas City and Topeka. He began by acknowledging that conservatism and political apathy now dominated the state and had done so for about a decade. What the future might yield was far from certain, however. Puritan laws against alcohol, gambling, and tobacco remained on the books, but they received only lip service from politicians. Ordinary citizens had become comparatively wealthy and craved outlets for their new leisure time. Would the activity of choice be another round of moral fanaticism or slippage into pure material indulgence? Both were possibilities, but Clugston hoped for still another alternative: the creation and support of regional literature and other aspects of the fine arts.¹⁵

A combination of economic depression and severe drought in the 1930s rendered Clugston's discussion moot. Kansans found themselves thrust back into frontier conditions in many ways, forced to live with little money and to wonder if they could survive this harsh and prolonged testing of their mettle. With dust storms "befouling every dear possession," people had no time for self-indulgence. "Sewing and laundry are impossible," observed one social worker, "cleaning would be madness." Although not all Kansans were heroic under these conditions, journalists reported an overall image of courage and self-reliance. Repeatedly, for example, they described instances where citizens were able to laugh at their own misfortune. A typical account told about a man so overcome when hit on the head by a raindrop that friends had to revive him by throwing buckets of sand in his face.¹⁶

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14. Albert Jay Nock, "Prohibition in Kansas," *North American Review* 204 (August 1916): 254–66, quotation on 261; Charles W. Wood, "Where To-morrow's Ideas are Born," *Collier's* 71 (May 12, 1923): 9–10, quotation on 10. See also Clyde L. Davis, "A Kansan at Large," *Atlantic Monthly* 124 (October 1919): 465–71, 641–48; Charles B. Driscoll, "Why Men Leave Kansas," *American Mercury* 3 (October 1924): 175–78; Driscoll, "Major Prophets of Holy Kansas," *ibid.* 8 (May 1926): 18–26; "Cigaretts for Grown-Up Kansas," *Literary Digest* 92 (February 26, 1927): 12; Meridel LeSueur, "Corn Village," *Scribner's Magazine* 90 (August 1931): 133–40; Karl A. Menninger, "Bleeding Kansans," *Kansas Magazine* (1939): 3–6; Robert S. Bader, *Prohibition in Kansas: A History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986).

15. W. G. Clugston, "Kansas: The Essence of Typical America," *Current History* 25 (October 1926): 14–20.

16. Avis D. Carlson, "Dust," *New Republic* 82 (May 1, 1935): 332–33, quotation on 333; Josephine Strode, "Kansas Grit," *Survey* 72 (August 1936): 230–31, quotation on 230. See also Frederick Simplich, "Speaking of Kansas," *National Geographic Magazine* 72 (August 1937): 135–82. Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), provides a good guide to the literature of this period.



CENTRAL KANSAS AS SEEN FROM CORONADO HEIGHTS, WHERE SPANISH EXPLORERS ONCE PAUSED. WINDING ROAD RUNS DOWNHILL FROM HEIGHTS

KANSAS

BILL WHITE'S STATE IS WIDE-OPEN AMERICA

As hard times receded in the late 1930s, Kansans again saw their state's image revitalized. Rural Kansas was evaluated in positive terms, as is evidenced in this February 14, 1944, article (above) that appeared in Life. In its glowing essay about the state, Life wrote, Kansas is "a kind of open window through which one can look and really see America."

As hard times receded slowly in the late 1930s and then demands for food increased to help England and France win a new European war, Kansans saw their image burnished once again. The state was still rural, of course, but newly urbanized Americans who had been unable to feed themselves during the depression now evaluated rurality in positive terms. Farming in the 1940s, in fact, was routinely described as a progressive enterprise, flush with paved roads, electricity coming right to the door, and new tillage methods such as contour plowing and strip cropping. Still another perceptual bonus during the war was the overwhelming nativeness of the Kansas population. Xenophobic observers bragged that plainsmen were pure American, a people not apt to absorb any "foreign 'isms' or strange doctrines." When federal authorities endorsed this logic and issued contracts to manufacture military aircraft in Kansas City and Wichita and to produce ammunition in De Soto and Parsons, life in the state seemed good.¹⁷

The positive imagery of the 1930s and 1940s proved short-lived, a temporary interruption to the negativity first glimpsed in the late 1910s. Kansans again became moderately prosperous in the decades between 1950 and 1990, but seemed unable to enjoy their lives. Some writ-

ers described the society as petty, others as self-deprecating. Outsiders were especially critical, of course, and began to mock the situation. When the Hollywood creators of *The Wizard of Oz* elected to contrast the glories of the Emerald City with a bleak, black-and-white view of Kansas, they crystallized an image that rapidly became dominant in postwar America.¹⁸

Kenneth S. Davis, a distinguished author with Kansas roots, provided an early and nuanced analysis of what he termed the state's "self-contradictory personality." The problem began, he said, when pioneer idealists gave way to a generation of "men who apparently kept all their values in cash registers." By itself, this small-town materialism might have been balanced by traditional pastoral values. The issue was paired, however, with a major structural change in the nation's economy. As Americans elsewhere increasingly wrestled with the tumult of a multicultural urban and industrial society, isolated Kansans remained agrarian.

17. Margaret Whittemore, "The Combines Are Humming in Kansas," *Christian Science Monitor Weekly Magazine* (July 26, 1941): 8–9, quotation on 9. See also "Kansas: Bill White's State Is Wide-Open America," *Life* 16 (February 14, 1944): 87–95. The best statement on Kansas war industries is in Craig Miner, *Kansas: The History of the Sunflower State, 1854–2000* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 303–16.

18. Thomas Fox Averill, "Oz and Kansas Culture," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 12 (Spring 1989): 2–12.

Residents tried to adjust, but their concepts, “up to date, even progressive in a rural society, sometimes became hopelessly reactionary when applied to an environment of giant corporations, slum-infested cities, and overt or covert class struggles.” Kansas voices that continued to stress “the early Protestant-capitalist virtues of sobriety, frugality, prudence, and self-denial . . . ceased to command a national respect.”¹⁹

The interpretation of Kansas as one of the nation’s backwaters was common enough by 1951 that it even appeared in the normally positive pages of the travel magazine *Holiday*. “To much of the nation,” wrote Debs Myers, the state’s people are seen as “strong in quiet, neighborly virtue, but increasingly barren of the ferment that produces challenge and conflict of ideas. In this threadbare conception, Kansas is . . . 82,158 square miles of flat and cheerless prairie, producing little except wheat and tedium.” Myers and other writers of the period went on to argue that this state of affairs was one that did not have to be. Out of a desire to preserve the current prosperity at almost any cost, Kansans elected “mediocre men who could be trusted not to criticize or upset the existing order.”²⁰

The self-imposed cult of the safe and sure exacted a heavy toll on the Kansas image. One example concerned the state’s most accomplished painter, John Steuart Curry. After the legislature commissioned him to paint historical murals in the state capitol, a large segment of the public denounced the result as too violent and bloody. Legislators endorsed this opinion by refusing payment on the project, and so Curry left his work unsigned and departed his home state for good. Mr. Curry’s exodus was not unique either. Commentators of the time frequently noted how the state’s confining atmosphere was chasing away many of its brightest young men and women.²¹

As the 1950s gave way to an increasingly fast-paced and urban world, perceptions of Kansas solidified. A native son who wrote for the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1961 said the state reminded him of “a well-heeled, full-figured dowager, rather smugly proud of her financial solvency, political cleanliness and widespread but rather bland culture.” Thirteen years later nothing had changed. A reporter covering one of Bob Dole’s senatorial campaigns said that outsiders still saw Kansas as it appeared in the movie *Picnic*, where the Santa Fe tracks “stretch endlessly away into an all-pervading flatness, moral, cultural, social, topographical, political.”²²

The essence of Kansas cultural identity in the 1950–1990 period is perhaps best captured by two stories. One is the career of Superman, the comic-book and

Kansas voices that continued to stress “the early Protestant-capitalist virtues of sobriety, frugality, prudence, and self-denial . . . ceased to command a national respect.”

19. Kenneth S. Davis, “That Strange State of Mind Called Kansas,” *New York Times Magazine* (June 26, 1949): 13, 50–53, quotations on 13, 51, 52. See also Davis, “What’s the Matter With Kansas?” *New York Times Magazine* (June 27, 1954): 12, 39, 41. The problems Davis describes apply to areas beyond Kansas, of course. The most famous assessment for the larger Midwest remains Sinclair Lewis, *Main Street: The Story of Carol Kennicott* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1920).

20. Debs Myers, “The Exciting State of Kansas,” *Holiday* 9 (June 1951): 52–63, 166–68, quotation on 53–54; Davis, “That Strange State of Mind Called Kansas,” 52. See also Nelson A. Crawford, “The State of Kansas,” *American Mercury* 70 (April 1950): 465–72.

21. Sue Kendall, *Rethinking Regionalism: John Steuart Curry and the Kansas Mural Controversy* (Washington, D. C.: Smithsonian Institutional Press, 1986); Myers, “The Exciting State of Kansas,” 57; Frank Morgan, “Report from the Heartland,” *Newsweek* 80 (September 11, 1972): 24–25.

22. John Bird, “Kansas, My Kansas,” *Saturday Evening Post* 234 (April 29, 1961): 20–21, 81–84, quotation on 81; Stephen Darst, “How It Is Playing in Emporia,” *New York Times Magazine* (October 20, 1974): 36–37, 97–103, quotation on 36.

Kansas, My Kansas

By JOHN BIRD • A *Post* editor revisits his native state—now celebrating her centennial—and finds the “old dame” fat and conservative, but fondly reliving her rip-roaring pioneer days.



In his 1961 article for the Saturday Evening Post, native son John Bird wrote that Kansas reminded him of “a well-heeled, full-figured dowager, rather smugly proud of her financial solvency, political cleanliness and widespread but rather bland culture.”

movie hero. His fictional hometown of Smallville, Kansas, was an ideal spot to nurture basic values of honesty and altruism but could not provide an appropriate stage for his mature ambitions. For that he had to leave the state. The second story seems equally exaggerated, but is true. It concerns two decisions in 1972 by the state’s attorney general, Vern Miller. Miller, deciding that he should enforce Kansas liquor laws to the letter, raided an Amtrak train in Newton and arrested several employees for maintaining an “open saloon.” Slightly later he demanded that all airlines quit serving alcohol when their planes flew through Kansas airspace. Courts upheld both actions, but the state became the butt of countless jokes throughout the rest of the country.²³

A TOUCHSTONE FOR BASIC VALUES

Amidst the general negativity of the 1950–1990 period, close readers of popular literature can detect a countertheme emerging for the state: nostalgia. A generation of small-town people who had moved to the nation’s metropolis and enjoyed a richer culture, faster pace of life, and greater technology now realized that their gains had come at a cost. They missed intergenerational family connections, a sense of closeness to the land, and the pleasure of knowing one’s neighbors. Such yearnings were vague conceptually but could be given substance by finding (or imagining) places where a simpler lifestyle still remained. The rural Midwest fit this need well, and Kansas (because of its past stereotypes) became one of its perceptual cores. Playwright William Inge, one of the state’s most perceptive observers, provided an early example of the new interpretation in 1968: “The Plains States are the heart of our nation, and that heart beats slow and sure year after year while the cities on the coastlines, crowded, competitively industrial, cosmopolite and more seemingly vulnerable to foreign influences, . . . manifest our nation’s violent anxieties and antagonisms.”²⁴

I do not mean to imply that warm, sentimental assessments of Kansas abruptly replaced those of blandness and reactionary politics. The 1980s, for example, brought a new term of regional deprecation called “flyover country” that remains popular today. This epithet is the modern equivalent to the “Great American Desert,” an urban elitist view of the nation’s interior as “a vast, boring, featureless expanse . . . to be passed over as quickly as possible.” Residents themselves also remain ambivalent about their home. In contrast to strong state pride shown elsewhere, my unpublished surveys from the 1980s to the present reveal that

23. Calvin Trillin provides a good account of the Vern Miller story in his “U. S. Journal: Kansas,” *New Yorker* 54 (August 7, 1978): 68–73.

24. William Inge, “A Level Land,” introduction to *The Plains States: Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota*, by Evan Jones and the editors of Time-Life Books (New York: Time-Life Books, 1968), 6–7, quotation on 6.

Kansas college students would prefer to live in Colorado or the Pacific Northwest.²⁵

Caveats aside, the regional literature suggests that positive appraisals of Kansas and the plains began to acquire a critical mass about 1990. Fifteen years later they seem poised to outweigh the negative ones. The reasons for this trend are complex. Nostalgia definitely fueled the initial phase, with the state and region seen as America's collective hometown—gentle, safe, and unchanging.²⁶ Urban problems then augmented and encouraged this simplistic yearning. Whenever Chicago or Detroit experienced racial turmoil in the 1960s, 1970s or 1980s, Kansas looked better. The same was true when garbage filled New York streets, gridlock paralyzed Los Angeles, or drug lords fought over Miami. Both Kansas State University and the University of Kansas now regularly report being able to “sell” their sports programs to big-city recruits partly on the basis of this perceived contrast between safe and dangerous.

Beyond nostalgia and other issues having roots largely outside the state, signs also point to Kansans becoming more positive in their own attitudes. Much of this progress stems from a growing realization that the state, with its small population and location far from the centers of mass media, has always been vulnerable to outsider opinion. If enough newspaper articles and movies paint Kansas as a desert (or a garden) and Kansans as dull (or heroic), these views may overwhelm local judgments and residents may subconsciously accept them as their own.

Several forces have prompted Kansans to reflect more on their home. One is a general trend of the time known as neolocalism. In reaction to increasing impersonalization and homogenization generated by the modern, globalized economy, people have renewed interest in their immediate surroundings. The rise of microbreweries to challenge the hegemony of Anheuser–Busch is a good case in point. Through the purchase of a John Brown Ale at the Free State Brewing Company in Lawrence, a person simultaneously can endorse quality and exhibit local pride. Other statewide illustrations of this movement include wheat designs on craft projects and the use of distinctive stone fence posts as holders for house numbers and mailboxes. Moving a four-hundred-pound slab of Greenhorn Limestone from its quarry in north-central Kansas to Topeka or Wichita is not an idle endeavor, of course, but the stone known as post rock conveys a powerful message about connectedness to the prairie landscape.²⁷

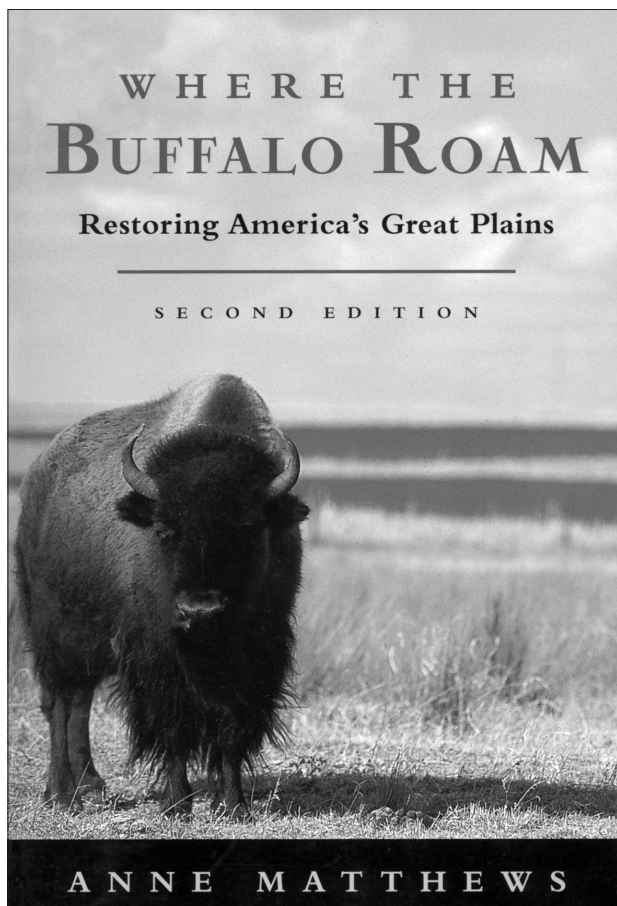
An academic article published in 1987 provided an unexpected, second impetus for Kansans to think more about their state. In this work, Deborah and Frank Popper analyzed the long-term population decline apparent in most Great Plains counties. They logically concluded that structural changes in the economy

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25. David Robertson, “Flyover Country,” in *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains*, ed. David J. Wishart (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 386. For maps of how different groups of students have assessed the various states, see Peter Gould and Rodney White, *Mental Maps* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1974).

26. The idea that Kansas symbolizes America's cultural roots may underlie the continuing popularity of *The Wizard of Oz*. Dorothy Gale serves as our national everywoman in this interpretation. She likes life in the big city, but ultimately decides to return to the simpler pleasures of home.

27. The neolocalist argument is developed in James R. Shortridge, “Keeping Tabs on Kansas: Reflections on Regionally Based Field Study,” *Journal of Cultural Geography* 16 (Fall/Winter 1996): 5–16. See also Steven Schnell and Joseph F. Reese, “Microbreweries as Tools of Local Identity,” *Journal of Cultural Geography* 21 (Fall/Winter 2003): 45–69.



Where the Buffalo Roam traces the work of Frank and Deborah Popper, whose analysis of the population decline on the plains initially was met with criticism by Kansans and other plains people who felt their way of life was being attacked.

likely would be necessary, and suggested that the government might want to purchase marginal cropland and convert it to grass. None of this seemed particularly controversial, but after a series of newspaper articles, Kansans and other plains people came to view the study as an attack on their way of life. This, in turn, prompted letters to editors, town meetings, and legislative debate.²⁸

After the initial vitriol, people realized that serious discussion about their future was badly needed. Denial that they had any problems gave way to thoughtful assessment and then to well-conceived proposals for action. School consolidation, long a taboo subject, was openly debated, for example, alongside alternatives such as long-distance learning via satellite and Internet courses. Business people began to find better ways to utilize the work ethic and company loyalty of local laborers, while farmers considered niche marketing techniques and other value-added production. Rural people also began to pay more attention to The Land Institute in Salina. There Wes Jackson has been developing strategies for sustainable agriculture in the region, including the creation of perennial grains.²⁹

Debate about the plains has now spilled beyond economic issues. People have noticed, for example, the uncomplimentary nature of the widely used words "treeless" and "semiarid." Why define this landscape in terms so negative and so obviously formulated by outsiders? Why not stress instead the glories of low humidity, clear-blue skies, and lush grasslands (and perhaps pity life in muggy, gray-skied, and prairieless places such as Pennsylvania and Virginia)? The aesthetics of the Great Plains environment also is being rethought. Many long-term residents truly love the region's open spaces, but have lacked words to counter the outsider's frequent judgment of them as empty and lonely. New articulations now appear regularly to an enthusiastic audience. They emphasize how plains life can cause the mind to soar and egos to melt away, creating a powerful, spiritual experience that some call prairie zen.³⁰

VARIATIONS ON KANSAS

Outside observers, perhaps influenced by the straight lines that form most of the state's political boundary, have always found it easy to generalize about Kansas. Local writers sometimes do the same, but people who know the region

28. Deborah E. Popper and Frank J. Popper, "The Great Plains: From Dust to Dust," *Planning* 53 (December 1987): 12–18. The best discussion of reactions to the Poppers' ideas is Anne Matthews, *Where the Buffalo Roam: The Storm over the Revolutionary Plan to Restore America's Great Plains* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1992).

29. John Grossman, "Tapping the Work Ethic in Fading Rural Towns," *New York Times*, November 1, 2004, C2. The literature on the Land Institute is large, but a good place to begin is Wes Jackson, *New Roots for Agriculture* (Berkeley: North Point Press, 1980).

30. Neil Evernden, "Beauty and Nothingness: Prairie as Failed Resource," *Landscape* 27, no. 3 (1983): 1–8; Kathleen Norris, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1993); Cary W. de Wit, "Sense of Place on the American High Plains," (Ph.D. diss., University of Kansas, 1997).

well see another scale of place images. This latter group perceive that western Kansas and western Kansans differ in important ways from their counterparts in the east. Such writers also believe that the Flint Hills and southeastern Kansas are worlds unto themselves and that, on a smaller scale, the same can be said for Douglas, Ellis, Geary, Johnson, Leavenworth, and Wyandotte Counties, for the Mennonite-dominated area in and near Newton, and for the packing towns of Dodge City, Garden City, and Liberal.

As I discussed at the beginning of this essay, tension existed in the 1850s between eastern Kansans and those in the territory's western gold camps around Denver. People in 1855 and 1856 discerned even greater differences between free-state advocates clustered in Lawrence and Topeka and proslavery Missourians who dominated Atchison and Fort Scott. Both of these disputes were resolved by 1859, however. Then, from that time until the early 1890s, nearly every writer saw the new state's culture as largely homogeneous. The presence of German settlers along the Santa Fe's tracks and of mixed ethnic groups in the Pittsburg coal fields and the packing houses of Armourdale was acknowledged, of course, but these things were portrayed as small irregularities in a state character dominated by former Union soldiers who were building up quality farmsteads and small-town businesses.

The drought decade of the 1890s brought in its wake major changes to the state's perceptual map. Kansans who wrote articles intended for national readership attempted a balancing act. Not wanting to tarnish their state's positive reputation, they continued to stress that this was "the most fertile territory on the globe." Needing to acknowledge the reality of the drought, however, they carefully added that this fertility consisted of two equal parts: the farming country of eastern Kansas and a west that, "although deficient in moisture, . . . is a Paradise for stockmen."³¹

The difference perceived between eastern and western Kansas in the 1890s actually ran much deeper than corn versus cattle. As the High Plains were being settled in the previous two decades, people there realized that major public institutions were all hundreds of miles distant from them. They felt that residents of the older counties dictated policy statewide, but did not understand High Plains needs. Western Kansas was vibrant, they said, eastern Kansas stodgy, and the best thing to do was to create a new state. The spirit of secession peaked in November 1892 after a series of editorials in the *Garden City Herald*. One supporter, railroad commissioner Albert Greene of Cedar Vale, argued that eastern Kansans were "tenacious of the old idea that the historical part of the state is all there is to it." Western plains counties had to develop "in spite of" and even "in defiance of" this condescending attitude. William R. Hopkins, the state representative from Garden City, added that a new state of West Kansas might include not only all the counties eastward through the tier from Smith to Barber, but also No-Man's Land (i. e., the Oklahoma panhandle) and parts of eastern Colorado.³²

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31. White, "Kansas: Its Present and its Future," 81; Taylor, "In Defence of Kansas," 352.

32. Information on the West Kansas statehood movement is in *Topeka Daily Capital*, November 22–27, 1892; for Albert Greene quotations, see *ibid.*, November 23, 1892; for William Hopkins's views, see *ibid.*, November 24, 1892.

DIVIDE THE STATE.

Western Counties Want to Withdraw and Form a New State Government

TO BE CALLED WEST KANSAS

The Movement Starts From Garden City and Will Be Put Forward in the Next Legislature by Representative Hopkins—Two States of Equal Area.

Special to the CAPITAL.

GARDEN CITY, Kan., November 21.—A movement has been started here to divide the state of Kansas, making two states of equal area. There is general dissatisfaction throughout the western half of the state because the eastern half has been, and is now, dictating in everything. The interests of the two

As the western part of the state became more populated in the 1890s, residents there believed the policymakers of eastern Kansas did not understand High Plains needs. A movement to split the state peaked following a series of articles in a Garden City newspaper. Above is one such article reprinted in the Topeka Daily Capital, November 22, 1892.

Although the rhetoric of the statehood movement employed such flowery statements as “an energetic people . . . absolutely one in interest and sentiment,” the driving issue was a perceived difference in agricultural needs. Drought had convinced Garden City residents that a system of irrigation canals and reservoirs made sense. When they tried to secure public financing for such projects, however, they found little sympathy in the legislature and assertions that the state constitution prohibited appropriations for such internal improvements. Some of the legislators had legitimate financial concerns, of course, but others did not want to imagine western Kansas as fundamentally different from the east. Secessionist talk ebbed away partly because private canal companies entered the scene and partly because continuing drought made western counties heavily dependent on state aid.³³

With its relatively dry climate, low population density, unique agricultural economy, and high rates of church membership, the High Plains today is clearly distinctive within Kansas. The area’s separateness also extends to perceptual matters. Residents remain distrustful of people in Kansas City, Lawrence, and Topeka who they see as unsympathetic to their situation. A study in 1992 concluded that westerners felt “neglected by the government, looked down upon by the cities, and ridiculed by everyone.” The truth of these words was revealed later that year when state legislators passed a new formula for school financing that blatantly penalized districts in southwestern Kansas. The result was another secessionist movement. People in nine counties went so far as to approve nonbinding referenda to that end. With other sympathizers, they also threatened to withhold tax money until the grievances were addressed.³⁴

Although residents of the Flint Hills have never lobbied for political independence, outside observers perceive a regional identity there nearly as strong as that on the High Plains. This upland, whose core extends south from Marshall to Butler and Greenwood Counties, is not particularly unusual in rock types or topography. Its alternating beds of limestone and shale exhibit only slightly more relief than similar formations to the east and west. Instead, the special feel comes from grass and cattle.

The Flint Hills is an island of ranching set in the midst of farming country. As such, its streams are clear and its vistas wide. Regional awareness is also helped by a location near the population centers of Topeka and Wichita, beautiful views from the Kansas Turnpike, and the recent creation of the Tallgrass Prairie Nation-

33. Ibid., November 23, 1892.

34. Paul E. Phillips, “An Assessment of the Validity of an East–West Cultural Dichotomy for Kansas” (Ph.D. diss., University of Kansas, 1977); Cary W. de Wit, “Sense of Place on the Kansas High Plains” (master’s thesis, University of Kansas, 1992); Peter J. McCormick, “The 1992 Secession Movement in Southwest Kansas,” *Great Plains Quarterly* 15 (Fall 1995): 247–58.

al Preserve in Chase County. A survey in 1980 found the Flint Hills “by far the most strongly perceived regional label in Kansas,” with the twin towns of Cottonwood Falls and Strong City its self-proclaimed “heart” and nearby Emporia its “front porch.”³⁵

Ethnicity accounts for the distinctiveness commonly asserted for two other rural areas. In the 1870s and 1880s parts of Butler, Harvey, Marion, McPherson, and Reno Counties became home to about fifteen thousand ethnic Germans who had been living for several generations in Russia. These immigrants and their descendants adapted well to the American economic system, but their Mennonite faith keeps them somewhat apart on cultural matters. Three denominational colleges in the region are visible markers of the group. Subtler, but still much discussed differentiation comes from traditions of modest living, pacifism, and service to people in need.³⁶

A second highly visible ethnic cluster exists in southeastern Kansas. It came about in the 1875–1910 period when coal companies in Cherokee and Crawford Counties recruited some ten thousand laborers from Belgium, France, Italy, Slovenia, and elsewhere. Miners ensconced in a land of farmers were reason enough for notoriety. Ethnic food customs (including a taste for wine in prohibition-minded Kansas) provided additional attention as did tendencies to vote Democratic and join trade unions. During a labor dispute in the 1910s, Governor Walter R. Stubbs said the area reminded him of the European Balkans. The label stuck. Local people see the name as a badge of pride, a tribute not only to their ethnic heritage, but also to the longtime industrial character of their area.³⁷

Some of the strongest regional images within Kansas today involve cities. This phenomenon is selective rather than universal, as people tend to see the cultures of Hutchinson, Salina, Topeka, Wichita, and other sizeable places as little different from their surrounding countrysides. The sharpest social divide in the state occurs in the Kansas City metropolitan area. There Johnson County epitomizes upper-middle-class suburbia while adjacent Wyandotte County and Kansas City, Kansas, are known for ethnic diversity and blue-collar employment. In a state where small towns and agriculture form the stereotype, Kansans see both counties as exceptional.

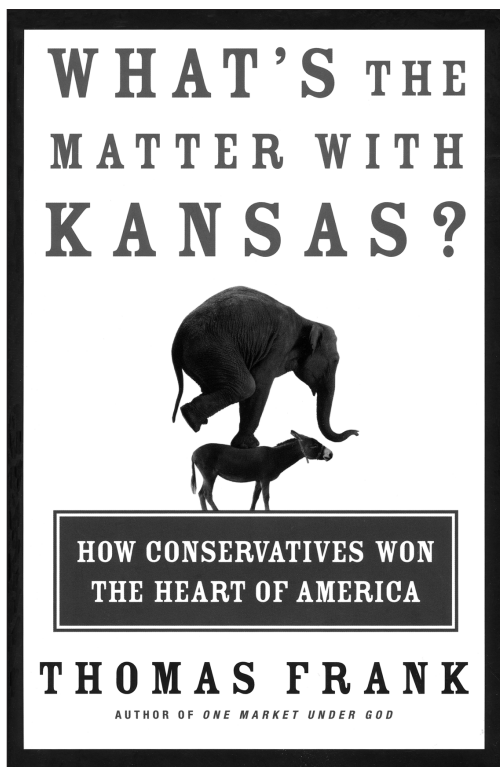
Kansas City, Kansas, was a creation of railroad and packinghouse entrepreneurs. African American, Croatian, German, Irish, Mexican, and other workers soon clustered near the shops and plants, and their descendants remain to assemble automobiles in the Fairfax Industrial District. Along with Democratic politics, kinship systems are strong in this city, something quite unusual for a community of 150,000 people. Johnson County is often said to be the creation of one man, J. C. Nichols. Seeking land to develop about 1910, he found prices cheaper

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35. James R. Shortridge, “Vernacular Regions in Kansas,” *American Studies* 21 (Spring 1980): 73–94, quotation on 83.

36. James R. Shortridge, *Peopling the Plains: Who Settled Where in Frontier Kansas* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 99–104; Steven V. Foulke, “Shaping of Place: Mennonitism in South-Central Kansas” (Ph.D. diss., University of Kansas, 1998).

37. William E. Powell, “European Settlement in the Cherokee–Crawford Coal Field of Southeastern Kansas,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 41 (Summer 1975): 150–65; Patrick G. O’Brien and Kenneth J. Peake, *Kansas Bootleggers* (Manhattan: Sunflower University Press, 1991); Amy L. Rork, “Sense of Place in Montgomery County, Kansas: Perceptions of an Industrialized Rural Area” (master’s thesis, University of Kansas, 1997).



Perceptions of Kansas continue to make the news. Thomas Frank's 2004 work (above) contends that the "averageness" of Kansans make them a symbol for "squareness."

in Kansas than Missouri. He initially built a cluster of luxury homes called Mission Hills, gambling that other people would want to live near the wealthy. Today's Johnson County shows that he was right. A 1980 survey of regional images produced the labels "suburbia," "rich," and "snob hill" for Overland Park and its neighboring communities. Writer Richard Rhodes added the epithet "cupcake land" in 1987. All these terms remain in common use.³⁸

Two more cities with well-defined images lie near Kansas City. Just to the north is Leavenworth, a community closely associated with its military base. For more than a century now Fort Leavenworth has been a prized posting for army officers, a place for advanced training in command and military strategy. For most civilians, however, this glory has been overshadowed since 1927 by the creation of a maximum-security federal penitentiary. The city is now so synonymous with the prison that the local chamber of commerce uses "The Great Escape" as its tourist slogan and is unhappy about a recent decision to lower the security level to medium. Twenty-five miles west of Kansas City is Lawrence, home to the University of Kansas. The university's image, always elitist, has become more so in recent decades. Some people now see Lawrence as an extension of Johnson County, but this view is belied by the city's voting record as the most liberal in the state.

Outstate Kansas contains five communities widely recognized for special peoples and values. One, ethnically diverse Junction City, is the state's second military town. Fort Riley trains enlisted men rather than officers. Its soldiers are younger than those at Fort Leavenworth and more likely to be single. Because of this, Junction City's public image has long been associated with illegal liquor and prostitution along with motorcycle shops and other youth-oriented businesses.

Ethnicity underpins the uniqueness of four western cities. Hays and surrounding Ellis County are home to descendents of several thousand Russian-German Catholics. Assimilation over the past century has been more complete than for their Mennonite counterparts around Newton, but Hays still typically joins Lawrence and Kansas City as the only places in the state to consistently vote Democratic. Newer cultural diversity exists in Dodge City, Garden City, and Liberal. The rise of major packinghouses there in the 1970s led to recruitment of labor from Viet Nam and then Mexico. Then, as immigrant numbers and job turnover rates both grew large, so did media coverage. This publicity, good and bad, has created strong local images for outside consumption. Longtime area residents enjoy the restaurants and shops opened by their new neighbors, but worry about strains being placed on school and social-service budgets.

CODA

As I write this essay, cultural conceptions of Kansas are again in the news via a popular new book by Thomas Frank and a major advertising campaign by the state government. Both take as their starting points a symbolism that hovers midway between positive and negative. According to the state's marketing survey,

38. Shortridge, "Vernacular Regions in Kansas," 77, 89-90; Richard Rhodes, "Cupcake Land: Requiem for the Midwest in the Key of Vanilla," *Harper's Magazine* 275 (November 1987): 51-57.

Kansas is “not sexy or chic.” Instead, asserts Frank, this is “a guileless, straight-talking truth-place where people are unaffected, genuine, and attuned to the rhythms of the universe.” Both assessments are consistent with my arguments here.³⁹

As the two studies expand from their common base, they suggest future directions for Kansas imagery. Frank is a pessimist, contending that the “averageness” of Kansans necessarily makes them a symbol for “squareness” and a group that can be duped by skilled politicians into voting against their own economic interests. The government’s promotional people are more positive, of course. They claim that their new slogan—“As Big as You Think”—connotes “wide-open vistas and limitless potential.” To the extent that the word “think” will help residents interpret their state for themselves instead of listening so much to outside critics, the campaign may turn out to be a cultural and economic success. Already the skeptics are active, however. They suggest alternative mottos such as “Kansas: Even Flatter than You Think” and (in a nod to Mr. Frank) “Kansas: As Liberal as You Think.”⁴⁰

Because images necessarily have at least some basis in fact, any Kansas Cassandra must keep in mind that the state will not be able to exchange its modest topography for mountains or beaches, or its relatively rural setting for subways and skyscrapers. These circumstances actually bode well for the future, however. Outsiders and residents alike, as I have argued above, show increasing appreciation for prairie landscapes and uncrowded conditions.

Cultural attitudes of local residents constitute another part of the image equation. The recent record here is not as good, at least when one focuses on how these thoughts and sentiments are perceived by people elsewhere. Media coverage currently associates Kansas with a series of extremist conservative views: the ongoing tirade of Fred Phelps against gay rights, challenges to science education by the state school board, and a legislative refusal to fund public education adequately without judicial coercion. So long as conservative political attitudes increase in strength nationally, Kansans may gain credibility for their extremist position. This is a dangerous situation, however. A swing of the national pendulum even slightly back toward the left will isolate the state more than does its rurality. As Kansans struggle to find their way in this postmodern world, I submit that their best motto is still the one from 1861—“Ad Astra per Aspera.” The “aspera” in the twenty-first century, however, are more attitudinal than environmental.

[KH]



The state’s “positive image” slogan claims Kansas is wide open with limitless potential. It, however, leaves itself wide open to spinoff mottos spotlighting Kansas’s extreme conservative attitudes.

39. David Klepper, “Sunflower State, Meet Your Slogan,” *Kansas City Star*, January 6, 2005, A1, A4; Thomas Frank, *What’s the Matter with Kansas?: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004), quotation on 28–29.

40. Frank, *What’s the Matter with Kansas?*, 30; “Kansas: As &%\$@*! as You Think,” *Kansas City Star*, January 7, 2005, E1.